

Alfred Williams Anthony

Kinds and Kindliness
of
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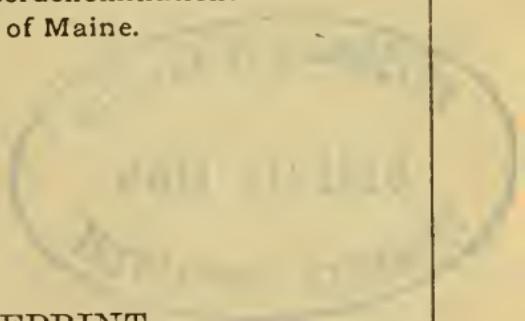
Interdenominational Problems

By

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JUST BY WAY OF PREFACE

The following pages were prepared as the basis of an address to be given at the Eighth Annual Meeting of the Home Missions Council, which was held in New York City, January 12, 13 and 14, 1915, and are printed in the Report of that Council.

The subject-matter has been presented by me in varying forms, both oral and printed, on platforms from Maine to Oregon, and in pamphlets of the Interdenominational Commission of Maine and of the Federal Council of Churches. My sufficient apology for repetition is what seems to me the necessity of giving "precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little", until in some form these fundamental definitions and underlying principles of coöperation become common property. I alone am responsible for the printing of these statements in the present form.

It is a useful service to promote an understanding of terms and of the fields of action; it is a greater to put into practice the principles of Christian comity and coöperation. They who do the latter, with kindness and grace, become incarnations of the spirit of Christ.

ALFRED WILLIAMS ANTHONY.
Lewiston, Maine.

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INTERDENOMINATIONAL PROBLEMS

Federations Function in Four Different Spheres.

First.—In the national sphere, wherein the units are national, denominational organizations, the functioning is strictly interdenominational, national, and of world reach. Creeds are undisturbed, individual convictions unaffected, and the relationship and activities of the local church influenced remotely and indirectly, if at all.

Second.—In State Federations, wherein the constituent units are fragments of denominations, organized as state bodies under the denominational name, the functioning naturally is co-ordinated with the functioning of the state denominational bodies themselves, and these are largely home missionary in character. The state denominational bodies organize churches, receive churches into fellowship, aid weak churches, and conduct campaigns of education and inspiration common to the entire membership of churches; while they occasionally represent the entire membership of their churches in appeals to outside or unecclesiastical bodies, as for example the Legislature, in seeking permissive acts or statutes for common welfare. The state federation therefore, finds its natural sphere of activity in the domain of comity, that is, in establishing right relations between state denominational bodies as they conduct their home mission enterprises. Since, however, nearly all denominations carry on their home mission work, not only through the state organizations, but with larger resources and farther reaching plans, through a national society or a national board, the full expression of a state federation calls for the coincident co-operation of both the state denominational body and the national society or board of home missions. In this latter direction state federations have as yet scarcely moved. In Colorado the only federation is a Council

of the officers representing the state bodies and also closely in touch with the national bodies. In Utah in February, 1914, a plan was outlined putting for the first time a state federation fully in touch with both the state and the national home mission bodies of the different denominations. Whether, however, the state federation reaches to the national home mission bodies, or not, the subjects of its consideration and service are chiefly of the following forms: Shall one church withdraw for the sake of another? Shall two or more churches in the same community combine? Shall denominational agents confer in order that they may not conflict in carrying out their plans? Shall the separate denominations assume peculiar responsibility for special classes or specific communities? Shall courtesy and consideration prevail between denominations and their agents such as should obtain between Christian gentlemen? Shall combination and co-operation take the place of competition and strife?

Third.—In cities and large villages the function of a federation is partly ecclesiastical and partly sociological, ecclesiastical when it arranges parish boundaries, censuses and surveys, when it conducts union campaigns of evangelism and of reform, when it establishes institutes of instruction, either for teacher training or for vacation Bible Schools, when it plans for united or accordant movements into the slums, or into the suburbs; it is sociological when it undertakes to bring a united Christian and church conscience to bear upon the problems of poverty, crime, the social evil, education, law and order, tenement housing, the wage earner and his welfare. All of these objects have entered into the program of city federations. These entail a sphere of activity and of functioning distinct from that of the federation in the national or state sense of the term.

Fourth.—In the local community, the small village, the hamlet, or the rural community as such, the function of federation is to deal more largely with the individual, at least with the individual in the small groups of the small church and the small neighborhood. Here the main problem is, how may

men and women, under the influence of inherited customs and traditions, with the bias of long continued practice and habits, and with the narrow vision of those whose experience is monotonous and observation scant, how can such people, preserving their individuality, combine in common worship and common service?

In this last sphere is the function of federation most important. Unless wasteful strife, bigoted pigheadedness, and the bitter dogmatic denunciation, which sadly characterized some small communities a few years ago, can terminate, much of the talk respecting federation is vapid and meaningless. The real test of the substance of our dreams is the practical application of the principle in the small community. Is the practical application possible?

The answer is, Yes.

In the first place churches and Christians in local communities have actually combined. They have combined in one of these four different forms of church: (1) The Denominational Church. In many cases members of different denominations have willingly enrolled themselves under the standard of another denomination for the sake of uniting all Christians in a given community for common tasks and common worship. The denominational church thus established by the surrender of some for the sake of all has been proven the best type of federated church. The federation of Christians in their own hearts has no superior. In some states, notably Maine, a plan of reciprocity, first proposed about ten years ago, has made this surrender and this merging of interests easier because an effort has been made to give to the denomination surrendering a church or a name in one community, an equal or similar advantage in another community; and have the denomination which gains in one place yield in another. This "give and take," this reciprocal exchange, establishes a sense of fair play, of equity and justice which makes the task easier for all concerned. Those who surrender do so the more readily when they realize that by their sacrifice members of their own order gain in some other community.

Denominational leaders and agents more readily yield advantage at one spot since they acquire advantage at another; and denominational statistics, the bête noire and bugbear of spiritual reform, receive compensations in gains to offset losses.

(2) The Multi-Denominational Church, or the Federated Church, has been tested in many communities all across the continent, notably in Massachusetts. This is a union of two or more ecclesiastical organizations under one pastor, usually in one meeting house, as one congregation, with common local functions but with separate denominational associations and allegiances. This form of federation withdraws nothing from denominational rosters, loses none of the advantages of denominational organization, oversight, and missionary enterprises; yet consolidates the Christians of the community for all local church purposes.

(3) The Interdenominational Church, or the Church of Federated Christians, exists in some places where the conditions of residence or the sentiments of the people prevent either the Denominational Church or the Multi-Denominational Church. In the Inter-Denominational Church individuals, without severing membership in churches elsewhere, combine for local church purposes. It may be that they are residing for but a short period within the community. It may be that there are but a few of each faith and creed, too few for a local organization, and yet too tenacious of convictions and customs for compromise and surrender, or possibly too far apart to find, at the outset at least, common meeting ground. This form of church, however, lacks denominational leadership and affiliation with the outside organized forms of Christianity.

(4) The "Union Church" in our present category may properly be classified as the Un-Denominational Church. This is purely a local church, sustaining no denominational connection. Such a church as this has been tried in many communities for a long term of years; and in almost every instance has been found unsatisfactory. Nine serious charges can be brought against it: (a) It lacks

associational fellowship; (b) it lacks outside supervision; (c) it lacks an adequate source of ministerial supply; (d) it has no approved literature, and helps create none; (e) it has no connection with religious education in a responsible way, by helping to support academies, colleges, theological schools, and seminaries; (f) it carries on no Home Mission work for the Immigrants, the Indian, the Negroes, or for the pioneer and needy settlements of the country; (g) it has no wide vision of world tasks and the extension of the Kingdom of Christ amongst all nations; (h) ordinarily it lacks an adequate system of truth; many denominational churches may fail to receive instruction of any large and comprehensive character, but the Union Church necessarily fails of it; and (i) in experience the Union Church has proven to be, unfortunately too many times, a church of discord and dissension. These are serious charges, and so nearly true are they that well-wishers of a community no longer advise the establishment of a Union Church; but seek rather the formation of one of the previously described types of churches, preferably the Denominational, if not that then the Multi-Denominational or Federated Church, and if not that then the Inter-Denominational Church, rather than the Union Church; but the Union Church is better than no form of local federation whatever.

It is of the utmost importance that denominational leaders, from the highest national councils down to the lowest local stewardship, should recognize the fact that federation does not involve the disregard of denominational standards and denominational organizations. On the contrary, federation from top to bottom honors denominationalism, advocates the maintenance of denominational organizations, and fidelity to denominational standards. Denominationalism within the scope of federation is just as possible as is the right of private judgment within the membership of a single church. Federation rests upon as sound a religious philosophy as does Protestantism. Only a papist insistence upon inflexible conformity and unvarying iteration precludes the federation of Christians and the federation of Christian churches. Denominational leaders must

recognize the fact that federation in its logical outcome and in its practical application, while calling for concession, surrender, and even sacrifice, yet entails at the same time fair play, advantageous gains, and favorable opportunities. It has in it the principles of justice which underly all genuine expressions of courtesy and comity.

So far as the individual Christian is concerned federation does him no injustice, even when by its application he severs connection with the denomination of his choice, and becomes connected with a denomination which would not be his primary preference. For all churches exercise in reality common social functions. These common social functions are: (1) the church is a social center of acquaintance and friendship, where the human touch prevails; (2) the church is a great educational institution in which the proclamation of truth, the explanation of principles of life, and the inculcation of personal duties are constant themes; (3) the church is a place of worship, where the deepest and most profound emotions are stirred in the sense of awe, and in expressions of adoration and praise; and (4) the church is the means of ministry and service in the community, the place where Christians combine in united good-will and good deeds. These several functions are the common functions of all churches, of whatever denomination.

Why then should men stand apart? Must they because of reasons unchanging and irreconcilable? The causes which keep men apart in different communions appear fundamental in character; but are not so far-reaching as at first appears. They are: (1) difference in temperament; and by temperament is meant those qualities of mind and heart with which men are born; but these undergo changes in process of time; (2) differences in tastes; and by tastes one means, of course, the results of cultivation, education, and habits; all of these, inasmuch as they have grown, are capable of alteration; (3) differences in opinions, shading off into convictions, doctrines, and creeds; all of these at bottom, and at best, are but opinions, interpretations of Scripture and of revelation in all of its forms; and these, too, if vital, are subject to change; and (4) personal

pride, for at root that tenacity, with which people hold to their sect, to their traditions, to their places and their positions, is but that self-complacency and self-assurance which is properly called pride.

These four distinctions do keep Christians apart, but they are not final nor fatal. Men can worship together and work together and be members of one organization, even though they have different temperaments, have cultivated different tastes, and entertain widely differing opinions. Will they forego their pride? Within a single denomination, indeed within a single church, there may be as great differences of opinion as exist between the central convictions of denominations themselves. Each denomination has its right wing, and its left wing; its liberals and its conservatists. We do not need to be alike in order to be in one organization. A federation calls for scarcely larger charity than a single church may demand. And this is true of federations as of churches—fraternity, intimacy of contact, co-operation in service, produce confidence, kindness, and a kind of conformity; for the law of assimilation operates; and unlikes approximate each other in the domain of friendly tolerance.

In promoting federations of any kind or description several kindly cautions must not be overlooked:

1. Good feeling, above all else, must be preserved. How can the spirit of justice, and of courtesy, and kindness prevail, if irritation has been produced, animosity aroused, and ill will engendered. An ideal thing or condition must not be urgently insisted upon, if the insistence becomes offensive to any. No good thing is worth while if obtained by a domineering personality, who disregards either the rights or the feeling of others. Dismiss your Pope and the Northeast wind, if you are seeking to promote a federation; and introduce your Christian gentleman and the sunshine of the balmy isles!

2. It is never wise to look for the full fruit first. The federation should begin at the beginning; and the beginning of each federation is close to the actual conditions just as they are. A conference, an occasional gathering, a friendly cup of tea, an

exchange of pulpits, courtesy and acquaintance are beginnings enough, if hitherto they have been lacking. The spirit of grace must have expression, the spirit of Christ must win its place in human hearts. Men must be sweet-spirited, affable, approachable, at least tolerant. He who deems himself alone perfect and thinks his own church the sole possessor of all the oracles of God has the task of beginning with himself, to bring himself into harmony with the other sons of God, if he would promote good-will and concord amongst the disciples of Christ.

3. It is unwise to begin with an elaborate program, perchance in imitation of some other federation which has outlined an ideal plan. One thing, or a few things, in which all, or even a majority, can agree, is better than a multitude of things however perfect ideally they may be, if they be too numerous for unanimity of sentiment and concentration of purpose. Too many enterprises, although worthy each of itself, entail too many committees, too cumbersome an organization and frequently too much expense, for the numbers and the degree of interest involved. Then a failure follows which could have been foretold by a wise prophet, and should have been avoided by a wise leader.

4. It is not right to trespass upon the domain of organizations already existing, even though they be partially dormant and to many unsatisfactory. It is a wise rule for a federation never to do what some other agency is doing, or will do, for the federation should not spring into life for the sake of combating some other organization, or entering into competition with it. Its characteristic function is to co-ordinate, not to coerce, not to suppress, the activities of other bodies. It must be larger in mind and genius, more charitable in spirit than all others. It should stimulate activity, prevent conflict and clashing and substitute for competition co-operation.

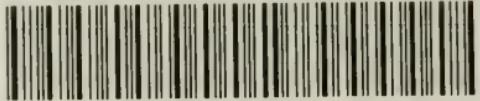
5. One cannot say too plainly, nor too often, that the chief virtue is patience—Christian patience. We must wait for the slowest person in the procession, if we are to maintain unity and promote the spirit of harmonious co-operation. What gain is

there if the head of the column unites with the head of another column, and there be a break midway in the line of march? What advantage is there to have the leaders of four groups of men combine, when the followers remain in their four camps, and the union results simply in the creation of a fifth camp? What profit is there in cutting off all the men of vision and broad charity from their followers, who need their sympathy, their oversight, and their care? Is federation abroad desirable if there be lack of unison at home? There is grave danger to-day lest our Federal Council be an organization of a few without the intelligent understanding and support of the great denominations behind their representatives. There is danger lest in our state federations there be a few men of each denomination, broad and charitable themselves, who have broken company with their own fellows and associates. There is danger, indeed, lest in a local community a few of the chosen spirits find fellowship together while the sum total of worshippers and adherents upon the church is not increased. We must be patient; we must move slowly; we must bring up the rear and gather in the stragglers. It is no disgrace, if one denomination finds itself handicapped with laggards more than another. Patience must persevere, charity should never fail.



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